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SENATE REPORT URGES RECOGNIZING AFGHAN GOVERNMENT-IN-EXILE AND ASYLUM FOR SOVIET PRISONERS

A Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff study, released today, makes three significant recommendations for U.S. policy toward Afghanistan:

- (1) American aid to the Afghan Resistance "in close consultation and coordination with key nations of the Islamic conference;"
- (2) a U.S. declaration of readiness to recognize an Afghan government-in-exile, if a unified and representative entity can be formed; and
- (3) immediate action by the United States and its allies to accept and assimilate scores of Soviet prisoners now held by the Afghan Resistance.

The report was written by John B. Ritch III, who visited Pakistan in February, met with Pakistani President Zia in Islamabad and with Resistance leaders in Peshawar, and then crossed into Afghanistan with a group of mujahideen (fighters in the Afghan Resistance). A senior Committee advisor on European and Soviet affairs, Ritch is the first U.S. Government official known to have spent time with the Afghan Resistance in the field. While with the Resistance, Ritch was allowed access to fourteen Soviet prisoners held by the mujahideen.

The report describes the Afghan war as a stand-off, with the Soviets maintaining general control of Afghanistan's major cities and the mujahideen holding virtually all of the Afghan countryside. Over the past year, however, the war has shifted slightly in favor of the Resistance, which has gained in organization and fighting strength and has begun to challenge Soviet control in the cities. The report underscores that without the backing of Soviet military forces now numbering 105,000, the Afghan regime of Babrak Karmal would collapse instantly. Once over 80,000 strong, the Afghan Army has fallen below 30,000 through mass defections and has little significance except as a continuing source of weapons for the Afghan Resistance.

Challenging the common assumption that a Soviet-dominated Afghanistan is a fait accompli, the report argues that the Afghan future remains an open question. The report finds little hope of progress in U.N.-sponsored talks now underway, unless and until Moscow accepts the concept of Afghanistan's return to the status of a neutral, independent country. Such a change in Soviet policy is likely, the report posits, only under increased military pressure on the ground and sustained political pressure in the international arena.

The report argues that the unification of the Resistance and the creation of a widely-recognized Afghan government-in-exile would not only increase such military and political pressure but could also facilitate a settlement by giving the Kremlin a clearer picture of Afghanistan's future should the Red Army withdraw. Under current circumstances, with the mujahideen in factions, the sole prospect would be civil war. The report finds that considerable progress toward unification of the Resistance has already occurred, and asserts that a declaration of U.S. readiness "in consultation with nations of the Islamic Conference, to recognize a unified Afghan government-in-exile" would provide a powerful stimulus to the unification process.

The report recommends that, in providing assistance to the mujahideen, the United States operate only in close consultation and coordination with key nations of the Islamic Conference. Such an approach underscores the valid and politically significant proposition that the Afghan struggle is essentially an Islamic struggle, whereas any activity that casts the war as an East-West issue tends to confirm Soviet propaganda, discredit the mujahideen, and compromise the delicate position of Pakistan.

The report also urges that the United States and its allies undertake an immediate program of sanctuary and assimilation for Soviet prisoners now held by the mujahideen. Holding such prisoners, the report notes, constitutes a new policy for the Resistance, adopted in hope of prisoner exchanges and positive publicity. The Soviets have been unwilling to exchange prisoners, however, and those being held by the mujahideen (estimates range from 75 to 250) have become a logistical burden. Establishment of an "underground railway" to the West would not only avert a massacre but would also benefit the Resistance by expanding Western consciousness of the continuing Afghan struggle, publicizing atrocities perpetrated by the Red Army, and encouraging further defections from Soviet forces.